

The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions

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This article is part of the series _____

At first blush, “ontology” and “politics” make strange bedfellows. Ontology evokes essence, while politics, as modern, democratic, multiculturalist citizens tend to understand it, is about debunking essences and affirming in their stead the world-making capacities of human collectives. Yet this notion of a social construction of reality itself instantiates a particular ontology, and a powerful one at that—and here we also mean politically powerful. Still, as anthropologists we are attuned to the “powers of the weak”—to the many complex connections, some of them crucially *negative*, between power differences (politics) and the powers of difference (ontology).

For purposes of discussion, then, we begin with a broad distinction between three different manners in which ontology and politics are correlated in the social sciences and cognate disciplines, each associated with particular methodological prescriptions, analytical injunctions, and moral visions: (1) the traditional philosophical concept of ontology, in which “politics” takes the implicit form of an injunction to discover and disseminate a single absolute truth about *how things are*; (2) the sociological critique of this and other “essentialisms,” which, in skeptically debunking all ontological projects to reveal their insidiously political nature, ends up affirming the critical politics of debunking as its own version of *how things should be*; and (3) the anthropological concept of ontology as the multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices, where politics becomes the non-skeptical elicitation of this manifold of potentials for *how things could be*—what Elizabeth Povinelli (2012b), as we understand her, calls “the otherwise.”

How might “the otherwise” be rendered manifest ethnographically? Here, we need to remind ourselves that ethnographic descriptions, like all cultural translations, necessarily involve an element of transformation or even disfiguration. A given anthropological analysis, that is, amounts to a “controlled equivocation” (Viveiros de Castro 2004) that, far from transparently mapping one discrete social order or cultural whole onto another, depends on more or less deliberate and reflexive “productive misunderstandings” (Tsing 2005) to perform its translations and comparisons, not just between different contexts, realms, and scales, but also within them. This, if anything, is what distinguishes the ontological turn from other methodological and theoretical orientations: not the dubious assumption that it enables one to take people and things “more seriously” than others are able or willing to, [1] but the ambition, and ideally the ability, *to pass through* what we study, rather as when an artist elicits a new form

from the affordances her material allows her to set free, releasing shapes and forces that offer access to what may be called the dark side of things.

Accordingly, while the ontological turn in anthropology has made the study of ethnographic difference or “alterity” one of its trademarks, it is really less interested in differences between things than *within* them: the politics of ontology is the question of how persons and things could alter from themselves (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; Pedersen 2012b). Ontology, as far as anthropology in our understanding is concerned, is the comparative, ethnographically-grounded transcendental deduction of Being (the oxymoron is deliberate) as that which differs from itself (ditto)—being-as-other as immanent to being-as-such. The anthropology *of* ontology is anthropology *as* ontology; not the comparison of ontologies, but comparison as ontology.

This, in our understanding, is what the ontological turn is all about: it is a technology of description (Pedersen 2012a) designed in the optimist (non-skeptical) hope of making the otherwise visible by experimenting with the conceptual affordances (Holbraad, forthcoming) present in a given body of ethnographic materials. We stress that such material can be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone; there is no limit to what practices, discourses, and artifacts are amenable to ontological analysis. Indeed, articulating “what could be” in this way implies a peculiarly non- or anti-normative stance, which has profoundly political implications in several senses.

For a start, to subjunctively present alternatives to declarations about what “is” or imperatives about what “should be” is itself a political act—a radical one, to the degree that it breaks free of the glib relativism of merely reporting on alternative possibilities (“worldviews,” etc.), and proceeds boldly to lend the “otherwise” full ontological weight so as to render it *viable as a real alternative*. For example, the relativist reports that in such-and-such an ethnographic context time is “cyclical,” with “the past ever returning to become the present.” It is an evocative idea, to be sure. But strictly speaking, it makes no sense. To *be* “past” is precisely *not* “to return to the present,” so a past that does so is properly speaking not a past at all (in the same sense that a married bachelor is not a bachelor). By contrast, like a kind of “relativist-turbo,” the ontologically-inclined anthropologist takes this form of e(qui)vocation as a starting-point for an ethnographically-controlled experiment with the concept of time itself, reconceptualizing “past,” “present,” “being,” etc., in ways that make “cyclical time” a real form of existence. In this subjunctive, “could be” experiment, the emphasis is as much on “be” as on “could”: “Imagine a cyclical time!” marvels the relativist; “Yes, and here is what it could *be*!” replies the ontological anthropologist.

Furthermore, when such “ontographic” (Holbraad 2012) experimentations are precipitated by ethnographic exposures to people whose own lives are, in one way or other, pitted against the reigning hegemonic orders (state, empire, and market, in their ever-volatile and violent comingling), then the politics of ontology resonates at its core with the politics of the peoples who occasion it. In such a case, the politics of ontologically-inclined anthropological analysis is not merely logically contingent upon, but internally constituted by and morally imbricated with, the political dynamics in which the people anthropologists study are embroiled, including the political stances those people might themselves take, not least on the question of what politics itself “could be.”

Indeed, one of the most oft-quoted (and criticized) mottoes of the ontological turn in anthropology is the notorious, “Anthropology is the science of the ontological self-determination of the world’s peoples,” and its corollary, to wit, that the discipline’s mission is to promote the “permanent decolonization of thought” (Viveiros de Castro 2009; for an earlier version of the argument, see Viveiros de Castro 2013 [2002]). In this connection, the first (unproductive) misunderstanding that should be dispelled is the idea that this is equivalent to fighting for

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indigenous peoples' rights in the face of the world powers. One does not need much anthropology to join the struggle against the political domination and economic exploitation of indigenous peoples across the world. It should be enough to be a tolerably informed and reasonably decent person. Conversely, no amount of anthropological relativism and old-hand professional skepticism can serve as an excuse for *not* joining that struggle.

Second, the idea of an ontological self-determination of peoples should not be confused with supporting ethnic essentialization, *Blut und Boden* primordialism, and other forms of sociocultural realism. It means giving the ontological back to “the people,” not the people back to “the ontological.” The politics of ontology as self-determination of the other is the ontology of politics as decolonization of *all thought in the face of other thought*—to think of thought itself as “always-already” in relation to the thought of others.

Third, the idea of the self-determination of the other means that a fundamental principle of anthropologists' epistemological ethics should be, *always leave a way out for the people you are describing*. Do not explain too much, do not try to actualize the possibilities immanent to others' thought, but endeavor to sustain them as possible indefinitely (this is what “permanent” means in the phrase, “permanent decolonization of thought”), neither dismissing them as the fantasies of others, nor by fantasizing that they may gain the same reality for oneself. They will not. Not “as such,” at least; only as-other. The self-determination of the other is the other-determination of the self.

This brings us to a final point regarding the political promise held by ontologically-oriented approaches in anthropology and cognate disciplines; namely, that this promise can be conceived, not just in relation to the degree to which such approaches are in affinity with (or even actively promote) particular political objectives, or with the abiding need for a critique of the state and the turns of thought that underpin it, but also in relation to their capacity to enact a form of politics that is entailed in their very operation. Conceived of in this manner, the ontological turn is not so much a means to externally-defined political ends, but a political end in its own right. Recapitulating, to some extent, standing debates about the political efficacies of intellectual life (e.g. the ambivalent stance of Marxist intelligentsias to Communist Parties' calls to political militancy in the 20th century —Adorno, Sartre, Magritte, etc.), the question is whether ontologically-oriented analyses render political the very form of thinking that they involve, such that “being political” becomes an immanent property of the mode of anthropological thought itself. If so, then the politics of ontography resides not only in the ways in which it may help promote certain futures, but also in the way that it “figures” the future (Krøijer forthcoming) in its very enactment.

The major premise of such an argument might border on a cogito-like apodeicticity (sensu Husserl): *to think is to differ*. Here, a thought that makes no difference to itself is not a thought: thoughts take the form of motions from one “position” to another, so if no such movement takes place then no thought has taken place either. Note that this is not an ontological credo (e.g., compare with Levi Bryant's recent [2011] “ontic principle,” which is pretty similar, but cast in the philosophical key of metaphysical claim-making). Rather, it is offered as a statement of the logical form of thinking—a phenomenology in Simon Critchley's (2012, 55) sense that is, moreover, apodeictic insofar as it instantiates itself in its own utterance. The minor premise, then, would be the (more moot) idea that *to differ is itself a political act*. This would require us to accept that such non-controversially “political” notions as power, domination, or authority are relative stances towards the possibility of difference and its control. To put it very directly (crudely, to be sure), domination is a matter of holding the capacity to differ under control—to place

limits upon alterity and therefore, ipso facto (viz., by internal implication from the to-think-is-to-differ premise above) upon thought also.

If these two premises are accepted, then a certain kind of politics becomes immanent to the ontological turn. For if it is correct to say that the ontological turn “turns,” precisely, on transmuting ethnographic exposures recursively into forms of conceptual creativity and experimentation, then ontologically-inflected anthropology is abidingly oriented towards the production of difference, or “alterity,” as such. Regardless (at this level of analysis) of the political goals to which it may lend itself, anthropology is *ontologically political* inasmuch as its operation presupposes, and is an attempt experimentally to “do,” difference as such. This is an anthropology that is constitutively anti-authoritarian, making it its business to generate alternative vantages from which established forms of thinking are put under relentless pressure by alterity itself, and perhaps changed. One could even call this intellectual endeavor revolutionary, if by that we mean a revolution that is “permanent” in the sense we proposed above: the politics of indefinitely sustaining the possible, the “could be.”

[1] Although one could somewhat uncontroversially argue that to take other ontologies seriously is precisely to draw the political implications of how things could be for “us,” given how things are for those “others” who take these other ontologies seriously *as a matter of fact*.

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Conversation

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